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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001057

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TAGS: PREL MOPS KPTS RS GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PEREVI -- STILL COMPLICATED

REF: A. TBILISI 0808

1B. TBILISI 0674

1C. 08 TBILISI 2413

1D. 08 TBILISI 2111

1E. 08 TBILISI 1988

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment. Russian forces still occupy the small village of Perevi, which is located in undisputed Georgian territory and outside South Ossetia -- a fact even the Russians do not dispute in private. The EUMM reports the Russians may be preparing finally to withdraw, thereby resolving an unambiguous violation of their ceasefire commitments, although the EUMM has been saying this for months. The Georgians have also heard about a possible withdrawal, but intend to downplay it if it happens, concerned lest the Russians turn such a long-overdue move into a public relations victory. Meanwhile the OSCE reports Perevi villagers are concerned about the recent arrival of South Ossetian militia in villages near Perevi, where some ethnic Georgians have reportedly been robbed. The U.S. and other international partners may be in the best position to encourage a resolution of the situation without handing Russia undeserved recognition. End summary and comment.

ARE THE RUSSIANS FINALLY LEAVING?

12. (C) On June 4, Head of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) Hansjoerg Haber told Tbilisi-based diplomats that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin told him during the May 18-19 Geneva talks that the Russians are getting ready to pull out of Perevi. Haber has since followed up with various Russian contacts, including General Proshkin, who participated in the Geneva talks and the first Incident Prevention Meeting in Ergneti (ref A); Proshkin said the Russian military would continue activities until June 15, at which point they would undertake a handover. It was not clear to Haber, however, to whom such a handover would be made: the Georgians, the South Ossetians, or even the Russians' own Border Guards. Russian officials, such as Russian Ambassador to the EU Chizhov, have given Haber promises of an imminent departure before (ref B); Karasin and Chizhov have both admitted to Haber that Perevi is outside South Ossetia. The Russians have explained to Haber that they intend to leave, but they want to avoid a repeat of their aborted departure in December 2008, when they claim the arrival of large number of Georgian special forces forced them to return. The Russians also want to avoid a public declaration of victory by the Georgian side, such as the statement President Saakashvili made on December 12. The EUMM's position has been to agree to the Russian terms of a quiet handover in order to facilitate a rapid departure.

13. (C) Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria told the Ambassador on June 5 that he had heard the Russians were looking to depart Perevi soon. He said the Georgian government would of course welcome such a move, but would avoid giving the event too high of a profile. Since the

Russians should have departed Perevi last October, he explained, and since the Russians admit that Perevi is outside South Ossetia, then the Georgian government would not want the Russians to get too much credit for something they should have done long ago. Furthermore, Bokeria said that a withdrawal from Perevi would have minimal impact on the Russians' larger, ongoing violations of the ceasefire; he would not want the Russians to get away with casting this action as a major, or even the final step in fulfilling its commitments.

MEANWHILE, LIFE IN PEREVI IS STILL PRECARIOUS

4 (SBU) The OSCE, the EUMM, and almost all other international organizations have not had access to Perevi for months; except for December 12-13, 2008, the Georgian government has not had access since the war. On June 4, OSCE monitors observed World Food Programme (WFP) personnel distributing food aid to Perevi villagers; WFP remains one of the only organizations that can still enter the village. On the same day, OSCE monitors also observed a Russian military helicopter flying along the administrative boundary.

¶5. (SBU) On June 8, the OSCE received reports from villagers in Perevi that South Ossetian militia had moved to nearby villages just across the administrative boundary inside South Ossetia: 300 in Sinaguri, just north of Perevi, and 50 in Karzmani, just east of Perevi. Those in Karzmani reportedly robbed some ethnic Georgians of such property as cattle. The Perevi villagers expressed serious concern to OSCE about the presence of these militia and said they would consider leaving if the militia remained so close. Because of their

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lack of access to Perevi or South Ossetia, the OSCE cannot confirm these reports.

COMMENT: LONG OVERDUE -- BUT NOT ENOUGH

¶6. (C) Although of little strategic importance, Perevi remains one of the most conspicuous examples of Russia's ongoing violations of the ceasefire. If Haber's reports are accurate, even the Russian MFA is embarrassed by the Russian military's presence there and would prefer to withdraw. The community of several hundred that live in Perevi face real hardships and fears, and a Russian withdrawal would resolve those concerns immediately (although not those of the ethnic Georgians across the boundary inside South Ossetia). At the same time, DFM Bokeria's concerns are valid: a withdrawal from Perevi is a minuscule, if important, step toward the fulfillment of Russia's commitments, and it should not be portrayed in any other way. Georgia finds itself in the peculiar position of not pushing too hard for a withdrawal from Perevi to avoid giving Russia a potential public relations victory, or a bargaining chip in the Geneva discussions or elsewhere. The U.S. and our other partners may have the most leverage to press Russia to do the right thing without having to trade something else away.

TEFFT